

# Understanding the Disaffected Electorate

## *Belonging as an Antidote to a Growing Democracy Crisis*

**Katrina Gamble, PhD**, Sojourn Strategies

**Martina Smith**, Ariel Research Partners

**Richard Shafranek**

**May 2026**

*In partnership with the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund*

## Executive Summary

The United States is experiencing a deepening crisis of democratic disconnection. Trust in government has fallen to near-historic lows, and voter turnout among young Americans declined sharply in 2024. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared a national epidemic of loneliness and social isolation. In The Kettering Foundation's 2026 *Is Democracy Working* report, 52% of young people believe democracy is performing poorly.<sup>1</sup> These trends are not unrelated. Our research suggests that they are converging into a major disruption in American civic life, where millions of individuals are losing faith in their own agency and power to effect change, and in the ability of political institutions to deliver what is needed for their families and communities. This rupture, this deep level of distrust and cynicism, is not one that traditional electoral strategies are equipped to address. It requires trust-building and organizing rooted in community and collective action.

The Democracy & Power Innovation (DPI) saw this growing trend developing years ago. Our Black Values research, first conducted in 2022 and again in 2024, identified a segment of Black Voters we named the *Rightfully Cynical* – individuals whose frustration and disconnection with politics is rooted in lived experiences of the repeated failure of institutions to deliver meaningful change for their families and communities. DPI's research of Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities identified similar sentiments of disconnection and frustration. We also heard from organizing partners that they often hear stories of frustration with elections and distrust of politicians. These are the same individuals that organizations know they need to bring into organized power, not just to impact elections, but to have the influence and power to transform the U.S. into a true multiracial democracy that delivers for all people.

---

<sup>1</sup> [Democracy for All Project, \*Is Democracy Working?\* \(2025\)](#). Gallup and Kettering Foundation.

So, building on more than five years of DPI research, we launched the most comprehensive multiracial study to date on what we call the disaffected electorate – individuals with both high levels of disillusionment and low levels of trust. We estimate that the disaffected electorate constitutes **roughly 35% of all adults**, translating into tens of millions of people on the verge of checking out of democratic life entirely.

Conducted in 2025 and 2026, the research includes a **national survey of 4,506 adults** fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago and **four focus groups** conducted in early 2026.

We focused on three core questions: (1) Who is the disaffected electorate? (2) How does disaffection impact political agency and civic participation? (3) What are the pathways to engage the disaffected?

There are four key findings from this research project.

- 1. Who are the disaffected electorate?** They are younger and lower-income, and, for the most part, there are no major racial differences between those who are disaffected compared to the overall population – meaning disaffection is experienced across all racial and ethnic groups. The disaffected are also more likely to identify as Independents (33%), and their primary concern is the cost of living.
- 2. Disaffection is not abstract.** It is grounded in specific, lived experiences of broken promises, deep distrust, financial struggle, and the sense that political leaders neither understand nor represent the working class. These experiences with politicians and elections mean that **frustration is now the prevailing sentiment (64%)**, shaping how the disaffected experience politics.
- 3. Disaffection is not the same as disengagement.** The disaffected participate in most forms of civic life at rates comparable to the general population. However, voting is the clear exception. Only 56% of the disaffected intend to vote in 2026 compared to 65% of the overall population. The disaffected have not checked out but are instead making choices about how best to use their energy and engage in civic life.
- 4. Belonging<sup>2</sup> is the strongest predictor of civic participation among the disaffected electorate.** Moving someone from the lowest measure of belonging to the highest results in a 25% increase in the likelihood of voting in 2026. Even incremental shifts have a significant impact. For example, a one-unit increase in belonging translates into a 2.5% increase in the likelihood of voting in 2026.

Taken together, these findings point to an important overall conclusion. The disaffected need, and what the evidence supports, is community. The traditional get-out-the-vote tactics that prioritize efficiency over authenticity are not sufficient. Community built through work that centers trust and collective action. It requires organizing that is focused on building civic homes – what our

---

<sup>2</sup> Belonging in this study is a composite variable that captures various dimensions of connection including personal (e.g. number of close friends), institutional (e.g. organizational membership), and community (e.g. cultural connection).

previous research has identified as spaces of shared values where people experience belonging, develop civic agency, and see collective action as a strategy to improve their lives and their community.<sup>3</sup>

This report offers seven recommendations for organizers, leaders, and funders on how to begin engaging the disaffected and bringing them more fully into civic life.

## Recommendations

1. Lean into **community**. While the disaffected are more isolated, **58% still indicate a desire to be connected to community**, and community provides hope.
2. The best way to engage the disaffected is through their **existing social networks**, especially **friends and family**. It is also important to **build online spaces**, because that is where many disaffected people are connecting.
3. Identify messengers who **share working-class experiences and lean into working-class values that address the immediate struggles the disaffected face**.
4. Build **civic homes** that create belonging by establishing spaces that are **safe**, where people feel **heard**, and where **civic agency** is strengthened and used to take **collective action**.
5. Do not assume that disaffection means low civic participation; instead, **work to identify aligned forms of action** for those you're working to organize.
6. When engaging the disaffected, **do not start with voting**. Instead, invite them into spaces with **clear and tangible pathways** to address their most pressing concerns, which are primarily financial strain, but also things that are rightsizing power for the working class.
7. **Art and cultural organizing** are also a good starting pathway for individuals who are disillusioned.

---

<sup>3</sup>Gamble, Katrina and Destiney Golden. (2025). [Building Civic Homes: Fostering belonging, agency, and collective impact in community organizations](#). Democracy & Power Innovation Fund. .